

Keeper of the Jet's Secret— The CIA

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The spectacular 2,000-mile-an-hour aircraft unveiled by President Johnson at his press conference Saturday was originally developed for and by the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

No other logical conclusion can be drawn from the evidence so far made public by the President and supplemented by Sen. Richard B. Russell, D. Ga., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Two factors in particular lead directly to the deduction that the new A-11 high-flying jet aircraft was developed as a reconnaissance aircraft by the CIA. First, the manufacturer and the plant at which it was built. Second, the fact that the program has been wrapped in airtight security for five years.

President Johnson disclosed that "the Lockheed Aircraft Corp. at Burbank, Calif., is the manufacturer of the aircraft." The U-2 reconnaissance plane, which became the center of a spectacular international incident in 1960, was also developed by Lockheed at Burbank.

And the U-2 was specifically developed for and by the CIA.

The development of the A-11 in utmost secrecy paralleled the secret development of the U-2 almost a decade ago. The funds for the new high-altitude jet

were included in other allocations in the Federal budget, just as all of the CIA's monies are disguised in this manner. It was the use of classified money that made it possible to keep the A-11 secret for so long.

The development of the supersonic needle-shaped jet is a technological triumph for the CIA, even though the plane is, ironically, now being tested for uses other than those for which it was primarily designed. The new plane's use as a reconnaissance instrument has been partly overtaken by both political and technical developments.

President Johnson announced that "tests" of the new planes were being carried out at Edwards Air Force Base, California, "to determine their capabilities as long-range interceptors." The clear implication of this was that the plane was not originally designed as an interceptor but has been adapted to that purpose.

By going back a bit, it is possible to arrive at an accurate estimate of the history of the A-11 and the men who developed it. The idea for its predecessor, the U-2, was originally brought to the Air Force by Clarence L. (Kelly) Johnson, Lockheed's chief designer, in 1954. The Air Force at first rejected the plan, but it was indorsed by Trevor Gardner, an Air Force research official, and by Richard M. Bissell of the CIA.

Kelly Johnson solved the staggering technical problems involved in building a jet plane that could fly above 80,000 feet, beyond the reach of Soviet fighter aircraft. By August, 1955, test models of the U-2 were in the air and in 1956 it began a program of overflights of the Soviet Union that lasted four years. Mr. Bissell ran the program for the CIA, and of course it also had the approval of Allen W. Dulles, then director of the intelligence agency, and of President Eisenhower.

On May 1, 1960, a U-2 flown by Francis Gary Powers, a CIA pilot, was downed 1,200 miles inside Russia. Washington said it was a weather plane, but Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev revealed he had both plane and pilot. The Paris summit meeting, scheduled for later that month, collapsed.

But at Paris President Eisenhower pledged that the overflights of Soviet territory would not be resumed, a pledge that President Kennedy reaffirmed after he took office in January 1961.

Therefore, as early as May, 1960, the U-2 had lost its usefulness as a reconnaissance plane over the Soviet Union (although not over other land areas.)

President Johnson revealed, however, that the A-11 was begun in 1959. That was one year before the Powers flight and the collapse of the summit meeting at Paris. The

men who launched the A-11 could not have foreseen the political events that took place in 1960.

In 1959 the need for a faster version of the U-2 must have been apparent to Mr. Bissell and Mr. Dulles. Kelly Johnson had solved the altitude problem by building the U-2 to resemble a glider with a jet engine. Its 80-foot wingspread supported the entire weight of the aircraft. But the plane was relatively slow-moving, flying at no more than 500 miles an hour.

While its great height would protect it from Russian fighters, it would be a sitting duck if and when the Russians perfected a ground-to-air missile. (The CIA, in fact, later concluded that Mr. Powers' U-2 had been downed by a near miss from an SA-2 ground-to-air missile.) In 1959, Mr. Bissell and Mr. Dulles would logically have pressed for development of a supersonic reconnaissance aircraft that would not only fly as high as the U-2, but much, much faster.

Their arguments must have been persuasive, because the A-11 program was secretly launched under President Eisenhower. Like the U-2, the new plane was built by Kelly Johnson. The A-11 program was continued under President Kennedy, even though the political pledges by both Presidents barred its future use over Russia. In the interim, as well, the development of secret reconnaissance satellites reduced the reliance on reconnaissance aircraft as the sole means of gathering photographic intelligence.